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Can Mr. Nixon Still Govern?

Can the President govern despite Watergate? The answer seems to be yes, if he stops dreaming of heroic achievements redounding to his personal glory. The model on the big issues should be the sharing of power with the Congress which President Dwight Eisenhower arranged with Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn during the last two years of his administration.

Consider first the economy.

Mr. Nixon, working through the medium of Secretary of the Treasury George Shultz, has tried to apply his own personal patented political medicine. That is, unrestrained consumer spending for the silent majority; tight restraints on parts of the federal budget that help Democratic clients; and an absolute minimum of controls on prices and wages. As a result, wholesale and retail prices have gone out of sight. It is only a matter of time before wages follow. When they do, the boom will topple over into a serious recession.

Nobody can be certain about the right cure for all these troubles—particularly at a time of Watergate jitters. But the right first step is to apply a temporary freeze on wages and prices. Two of the most thoughtful congressional Democrats—Sen. Mike Mansfield of Montana and Rep. Wilbur Mills of Arkansas—suggested precisely that last week, and if the President only accepts their formula, he will be on top of a problem that could become truly dangerous.

Consider next the matter of dealing with friends and allies which found expression last week in Mr. Nixon's meeting with French President Georges Pompidou in Iceland.

Mr. Nixon's chief foreign policy adviser, Henry Kissinger, has been talking about a new Atlantic charter which would link the United States, Japan and the countries of Western Europe in a big deal to end all big deals. The only trouble is that the material for a big deal isn't there. Nobody has figured out how to take the Japanese into the club, and the Europeans are at odds as to how to manage their own defense and economic problems.

So the best approach would be to let matters follow their present course. Various secretaries of defense would get together and modernize security arrangements. Various secretaries of the treasury would work out plans for a new monetary system. Trade negotiations would go forward after the Congress passes a new trade bill. Various people, in other words, would make music without any Toscanini trying to orchestrate a supreme symphony from the White House.

Lastly, there is the issue of dealing with the Communists which comes to a head when Leonid Brezhnev of the Soviet Union visits the United States this month. Mr. Brezhnev is hungry for American capital, know-how, machinery and grain.

In the past, Mr. Nixon and Dr. Kissinger have wrung from Mr. Brezhnev various trades of special uses to their clients. In particular, they have used Mr. Brezhnev's appetite for American favor to make a deal that improves the survivability of the South Vietnamese regime of President Nguyen Van Thieu. Apparently they have some other complicated arrangement in mind for the Brezhnev trip.

But with Mr. Nixon in a vulnerable position because of Watergate, the sensible thing for him is to return to basics. What this country, and indeed the whole world, wants out of Moscow is the beginning of a withdrawal of Soviet troops from central Europe which will permit the United States to thin out its commitments in Europe. The Congress and especially Mansfield have been pushing for that all along. So by associating himself with the congressional leaders, the President will be in potent position to wring from the Russians what we should have been seeking all along as a first priority—arrangements for a mutual troop withdrawal from Europe.

In sum, the President can continue to govern while the Watergate investigation goes forward. And there is no need to sprint through the hearings, as now argued by those who used to favor a total cover-up.

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